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Response to Ledeen

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Response

Jesse Bryan Uggla

The world around us is changing more rapidly and profoundly than it ever has before and living in this global age demands that we reconsider how we think about and act towards the rest of the world. Each and every one of us is a trailblazer in a new social, economic, and political paradigm, and, not unlike Atlas, we have a heavy burden on our shoulders. Indeed, the tone for the next hundred years is being set now by the way our global leaders conduct themselves and how we as global citizens direct their actions. For all of us, the stakes are extremely high.

But how do we exercise these new civic duties brought about by globalization? I believe the process begins with dialogue, the sharing of ideas, and the struggle not just to acknowledge other people's perspectives, but to thoroughly understand them as well. In the end, we may not agree on anything, but if common ground and shared values exist, we must seize the opportunity to seek them out and build on them. Events like the International Roundtable at Macalester College provide this sort of opportunity by bringing together people of diverse ideological and philosophical backgrounds, with varying degrees of expertise and knowledge, in a single critical engagement. The commissioned essays, in particular, provide a strong base from which intelligent and calculated discussions can be developed.

Dr. Ledeen's essay provides several important arguments that contribute significantly to our understanding of this remarkable historical moment. To begin, he rightly claims that we must consciously recognize that the United States is an anomalous nation. Though I would be hesitant to say that we are "more different" than any other country—since that type of thinking promotes an "Us versus Them" *mentalité* that can vitiate the exercise of global citizenship—America is unique in many regards. Geographically, economically, and politically we are a privileged nation; unfortunately, we seldom consider how we've become so or what that means relative to the rest of the world.

In the same vein, it is true that too many Americans take their privileges for granted and fail to realize that the very luxuries they

enjoy rest on their ability to protect and maintain them. Engaging in domestic issues and acknowledging the link between our international demeanor and our domestic security are in every American's self-interest. Ledeen is therefore right to criticize us for having a myopic understanding of politics and international affairs. When we do take an interest in the decisions of our leaders, we are shortsighted, we place pressure on them to produce quick results, and we prioritize short-term gains over far more essential long-term objectives. While we can place blame on institutions like the media, which Ledeen so accurately portrays as misleading, the ultimate responsibility lies with us as public actors, voters, and consumers.

In terms of orchestrating foreign policy, we ought to avoid being "utopian Washingtonians at peace and crusading Jeffersonians at war." It is imperative that we demarcate a clear set of foreign policy objectives in addition to a pragmatic strategy for realizing them. We need to understand that it is not always necessary to achieve total victory or humiliating defeat before we disengage in conflict. More importantly, we should try to avoid viewing our role abroad in terms of "victory" and "defeat." While our interests are important, so is justice and responsibility. Though it is not a new idea, I will argue later that we can do this if we seek to help ourselves by helping others at the same time.

Finally, turning to terrorism and the war on Iraq, I must credit Ledeen with making two paramount observations. First, we have mismanaged the struggle against terrorism and need to make some serious adjustments in order to curtail the phenomenon. Second, there is no doubt that a victory in Iraq (whatever that could mean at this juncture) will not quell the discord festering in the Middle East.

Now is a time for rigorous introspection, and Ledeen is right to suggest that we step up our efforts to change direction before we walk too far down the wrong path.

Bearing these in mind, I will now discuss a few points where the opinions of Dr. Ledeen and I diverge. For one, while it may be true that Americans tend to think that peace is the natural state of human affairs, rather than war, I do not think we are ill prepared to defend ourselves as a nation. Do we really dismantle our military apparatus after a particular struggle ends? Are we really always "candidates for a

sucker punch"? Since the late 1940s we have either overtly or covertly engaged our military in more than twenty-six conflicts throughout the world.¹ We have military bases on every continent, barring Antarctica, and we spend hundreds of billions of dollars each year on improving our military-industrial complex.² I think this tendency, in fact, lies at the heart of one of our major problems as a nation. We do need a superior military to protect our interests in the world, but we fail to understand that there are other ways to use our resources to achieve that objective. While our Congress has been willing to spend 16% of the national budget on defense, the spending on international affairs has diminished from 4% in the 1960s to just 1% today.³ Our military is definitely important, but as Joseph Nye points out in his book *The Paradox of American Power*, "it is not sixteen times more important than diplomacy."⁴

In relation to terrorism, Ledeen suggests that preemptive action may be our best bet to avoid the potential "first strike" that could bring ruin to our nation. I would argue that such a disposition could only increase threats against us, as it would surely provoke enormous animosity in our direction. Furthermore, even if we were somehow capable of wiping out an entire terrorist group, or a network of groups for that matter, we would only be acting in a reactionary manner toward the fundamental problem. If we should preempt anything, it should be the behavior that causes terrorists to loathe us in the first place, such as assuming what other countries need without asking for their input or masking the pursuit of our interests in a rhetoric of benevolence. In the best-case scenario, preemptive strikes and the unilateralism that often characterizes them will provide us with the very temporary solutions that Ledeen himself criticizes; in the worst case, we will encourage hatred among our foes and tempt our allies to conspire against us.

This relates to another aspect of Ledeen's argument: that we need to focus on the terror masters, that is, the leaders of nations, religious groups, and other sects who support and protect the terrorists. While this is undeniably part of the equation, the quintessential cause of disdain toward us cannot be eliminated by pursuing such an agenda. Even if states like Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Saudi Arabia only support anti-Western terrorism because they believe our democratic example is a threat to the legitimacy of their regimes—a notion that I think is somewhat unfounded historically⁵—deposing their leaders will not address the *causes* of terrorism. Hatred against us does not only derive from the fears of tyrannical leaders and those who imprudently accept their

declamations as fact. It comes from the way we are viewed abroad—our perceived intentions in relation to the rest of the world and the nature of our domination in the global system. Will eliminating the terror masters preclude others from rising through the ranks to replace them? Once again, it seems that Ledeen favors short-term solutions to problems that require long-term strategies.

To be fair, however, I must acknowledge that Ledeen's ultimate tactic is not to use force to confront terrorism, but to promote "democratic regime change" abroad. He states: "It doesn't require armies, it requires money and equipment—like satellite phones and radio and television stations—and above all consistent and coherent statements from all our leaders." I think we should promote democracy wherever possible, but I'm confused as to how we are supposed to do that with money, equipment, and the statements of our leaders. If this means some form of intervention, would we not be accused of doing what we always do—pursuing our interests in the name of our alleged ideals? If it means opening channels of global communication so that others can see how we live, desire it for themselves, and fight for it, are we really so certain that our way of life is attractive to people in other parts of the world? Americans are apathetic and indifferent toward political matters. Our leaders, as Ledeen points out, are inadequate, and our democratic system is pregnant with contradictions. In an article recently published in *The Economist*, entitled "No Way to Run a Democracy," a number of serious defects in our system are outlined, including an electoral college that is unresponsive to the popular vote;⁶ half of an electorate that doesn't vote at all; campaigns awash with corporate money and negativity; the demarcation of congressional districts by legislators that assures their reelection;⁷ overly complicated registration policies; and unreliable electronic voting equipment that doesn't leave a paper trail.⁸ These considerations only scratch the surface. Dr. Ledeen claims that we brought down the Soviet Union despite the fact that only a fraction of its subjects were ready to fight for freedom. Did not the Soviet Union, in fact, collapse due to the inherent contradictions in its economic system and the repression by a centralized state? Perhaps intervention is not the key. I think that if we want democratic regime change overseas we should be open, supportive to those who ask for our help, and above all, lead by example by placing our own affairs in order so that the logic and stability of our institutions are made self-evident.

Taking a step back from this commentary to add my personal reflections on the theme of this Roundtable, I would like to make a few observations and suggestions for how America, currently the world's only superpower, might envision its role in the global community—not as an empire, but rather as a *just* and *responsible* leader.

As an American, I cannot argue that our country should sacrifice its interests or actively relinquish its power. I value the opportunities I have and, like most Americans, would like to continue living the way that I do, at least for the most part. What must be asked is whether the preservation of our interests abroad obviate *just* global leadership.

Nye says that, "The ability to obtain outcomes one wants is often associated with the possession of certain resources, and so we commonly use shorthand and define power as possession of relatively large amounts of such elements as population, territory, natural resources, economic strength, military force, and political stability."⁹ According to this matrix, America appears to be quite powerful and will likely continue to be so well into the future. Yet, as he suggests, there are other sources of power as well, namely, that which he calls "soft power." Based in part on the ideas of Antonio Gramsci, Nye defines this soft power as the capacity to set the political agenda in ways that shape the preferences of others. He explains:

Soft power is not merely the same as influence, though it is one source of influence. After all, I can also influence you by threats or rewards. Soft power is also more than persuasion or the ability to move people by argument. It is the ability to entice and attract. And attraction often leads to acquiescence or imitation.¹⁰

In essence, if a country can get another to *want* what it wants, it doesn't have to *force* it to do what it does not want to do.

In Nye's opinion, the countries that have the greatest chance of exercising soft power in the 21st century are: (1) those whose dominant cultures relate closely to global norms; (2) those who have access to the infrastructure of communication and thus can influence how important issues are framed; and (3) those whose credibility is highly esteemed as a result of their domestic and international behavior.¹¹ America is in a better position than most countries to exercise this crucial form

of power, as long as our leaders can be convinced to act quickly and sensibly.

In taking such a position, I am not suggesting that military, economic, and other forms of “hard” power are irrelevant to our national project. I simply believe that we shouldn’t focus too narrowly on them; hard and soft power are mutually reinforcing.

The question remains, however: how can soft power preserve our status and protect our interests in the world? My response, derived in large part from the work of Nye, is that while our survival is priority number one, we should try to use our soft power, and the common values that it relates to, for building alliances, constructing global public goods, and directing our behavior in ways that generate acceptance and approval from other people in the world.

In relation to alliances and public goods, we can strive to: (1) maintain the balance of power in important regions of the world; (2) promote an open international community; (3) preserve international commons, like the environment; (4) maintain international rules and institutions; (5) provide economic assistance to other nations when appropriate; and (6) act as convener and mediator in global conflicts.¹²

In other matters, we can exercise prudence in humanitarian interventions and strive to embrace multilateral action. For the former, this could mean respecting the right to self-determination, encouraging other actors to take the lead in intervention, and making sure that success is feasible before we commit ourselves to a cause. As to the latter, while we cannot subordinate our pivotal interests, we should recognize that we benefit in many ways from multilateralism. It reduces the incentive to build alliances against us, it helps share the burden of international responsibility, and it enhances our soft power through the prerequisite of operating through common values.¹³

If managed properly, I believe a balance can be struck between our interests and survival as Americans, on the one hand, and global interests coupled with human survival, on the other. The key is recognizing when and how to use our various resources and influence.

In sum, we must recognize the gravity of this crucial moment in history. We are the pioneers of a new system and all of us need to ask ourselves what that means. I suggest that we should frequently remind ourselves of our global citizenship, and seek relationships with one another that will help us confront the perils and contradictions that are inherent in this system. As for leadership, and specifically America’s role in this global calculus, now is the time for a push towards greater

responsibility and global justice. As I have tried to argue, for Americans, this is cogent for at least two reasons. One, it fortifies our position through the accumulation of soft power and protects us from harm by influencing others to hold our society in high esteem. Two, some of our interests, such as stopping global terrorism or nuclear proliferation, are simply impossible to achieve without the help of others. In the final analysis, if we desire a Pax Americana rather than a "Pox Americana," we need to urge our leaders to change our national strategies to the tune of greater cooperation, the pursuit of mutual interests, and above all, respect for the responsibilities of global citizenship.

Notes

1. Major U.S. interventions, both overt and covert, include China (1945), Greece (1947–49), Korea (1950–53), Iran (1953), Guatemala (1954), Indochina (1954–73), Lebanon (1958), the Congo (1960–64), Cuba (1961), Indonesia (1965), the Dominican Republic (1965–66), Chile (1973), Angola (1976–92), Lebanon (1982–84), Grenada (1983–84), Afghanistan (1979–1989), El Salvador (1981–92), Nicaragua (1981–90), Panama (1989–90), Iraq (1991), Somalia (1992–94), Haiti (1994, 2004), Bosnia (1995), Yugoslavia (1999), Afghanistan (2001–present), and Iraq (2003–present).
2. We currently spend about 400 billion dollars on our military every year. See Sherle R. Schwenninger, "A World Neglected: The Foreign Policy Debate We Should Be Having," *The Nation* 279, no. 12 (18 October 2004): 14.
3. Joseph Nye, *The Paradox of American Power: Why the World's Only Superpower Can't Go it Alone* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), p. 143.
4. *Ibid.*
5. The United States has a history rife with examples of support for tyrannical dictatorships and authoritarian governments, both during the Cold War and after. Our security and economic interests seem to far outweigh our concern for democracy abroad.
6. "[E]ven if you accept that Mr Bush won the electoral college fairly, which by most measures he did, there is the awkward point that Al Gore won more votes." Quoted in "No Way to Run a Democracy," *The Economist* 372, no. 8393 (18–24 Sept 2004): 13.
7. "The result is gerrymandering on a grotesque scale, with incumbents stitching up safe seats by drawing absurd districts that look like doughnuts, sandwiches and Rorschach tests." *Ibid.*
8. "In one recent Indiana contest, 5,352 voters somehow produced 144,000 votes." *Ibid.*
9. Nye, p. 5.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 9.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 69.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 147.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 167.